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ABSTRACT

A study used aesthetic criteria and artistic criticism to find meaning in one part of the kindergarten and first grade curriculum, "Writing To Read," a computer-based program for beginning reading. Subjects, students in a kindergarten class, were observed several days a week from the day in April when they began the program until the day that most of the children completed the program in December. Data consisted of brief notes made during the 25 hours of observation. Results indicated that: (1) students engaged in a slightly modified version of the program; (2) children spent time waiting to start, waiting to continue, or waiting to stop activities at each of the stations on the program; (3) interruptions were common and came from many sources; (4) control of the children by the teacher was primary; (5) the balance inherent in the design of the program was frequently compromised; (6) a disturbing lack of consistency was observed in the expectation that children be creative in writing stories and in the reality that they were not given time to create; and (7) "playfulness" was not encouraged. Findings suggest that this implementation of "Writing To Read" is not "educative"--it does not lead to mental and moral growth. (Eighteen notes are included.) (RS)

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An Artistic Criticism of "Writing to Read", A Computer Based Beginning Reading Program

Dorothy Huenecke

> Computers are controllable by their users to a degree never before seen in any electronic device and to a degree matched only by paper and pencil, chalkboard, and overhead projector. No other educational innovation has offered anything comparable in power, unless we consider writing, the number system, or speech itself to be educational innovations.
>
> Decker Walker[1]

> . . . all things made whether in art or in practical life, possess form (which has) aesthetic properties.
>
> Elliot Eisner[2]

The form of education is of great significance because the form it takes carries meaning. Education is an expression of meaning as much as paintings, pantomime, and poetry, and just as these can be viewed aesthetically, so can education be viewed aesthetically.

In this study I used aesthetic criteria and artistic criticism to find meaning in one part of kindergarten and first grade curriculum, "Writing to Read", a computer-based program for beginning readers.[3] Writing to Read offers a unique opportunity for artistic criticism because it combines the long accepted notion of teaching reading skills to young children with the more recent cultural priority of computer literacy. The early use of computers, the early (kindergarten) exposure to

rormal reading materials, the cost of the program, the infusion into the curriculum of a consumer product, and the fact that the program is a separate and discrete part of the school day piqued my interest in the program.

The purpose of this study was not to analyze the effectiveness of Writing to Read. Many studies have been devoted to this end; Slavin analyzed 29 studies from 22 school districts and found the program's effectiveness to be questionable, especially in terms of long range effects.[4] My interest was not in effectiveness, however, but in meaning. I undertook an investigation of one Writing to Read classroom without focusing on achievement outcomes; I was guided by the sense of Scriven's goal free evaluation.[5] I sought meaning in the program in its patterns and rhythms, meaning that may not have been intended or even recognized.

The role I played in this study was that of observer. I started with a kindergarten class the day in April they began the program and continued observing several days a week in first grade until most of the children had completed the program in December. I observed for approximately 25 hours overall. I took brief notes while I was in the classroom and sometimes noted questions that came to mind.

I was seated in a chair when the children came into the Writing to Read lab. I observed all I could from my corner, moving around when I needed to hear or see something across the

room. For the most part, the children ignored me even though I know they wondered sometimes why I didn't help them with the tape recorders or make them pick up a crayon on the floor. On the rare occasions that a child asked me what I was doing there, I would respond "I'm trying to learn about Writing to Read."

The teachers were more aware of my presence. One of my children had three of the teachers I observed: the paraprofessional who runs the lab, the kindergarten teacher, and the first grade teacher. This was coincidental, not planned. I think I was a known quantity to them (a nice, accepting, supportive, room mother type), but I don't think I blended into the background for them as much as I did for the children.

My goal was to gain a sense of a specific Writing to Read program, to find meaning in it, to look at it with new lenses in a different light. Artistic criticism was my medium for this pursuit.

Education As Art

The conceptualization of education as an artistic endeavor is not new. Teaching, for example, has long been considered by some as an art. Kagan states:

> Anyone who has taught or who is well acquainted with teachers knows that a skilled teacher derives an aesthetic satisfaction from creating a well-crafted "composition". This includes satisfaction with the shape of the lesson as it might be depicted in graphic form, as well as a kind of euphoria after the performance.[6]

In a classic work that first appeared more than twenty-five years ago, Huebner called for an aesthetic view of education that would lead to valuing educational activity in terms "of wholeness, of balance, of design, and of integrity."[7] Mann asserted that a curriculum can be "artful" and can be viewed as an artistic creation.[8] As such, it is subject to artistic criticism.

Valance identified four functions of art criticism:

1. revealing the uniqueness of individual works
2. re-educating the perception of viewers by identifying new or previously unnoted functions of the work
3. providing a means for judgment
4. creating order by labelling, naming, and forming categories.[9]

In performing these tasks, the art critic has at least one advantage over the educational critic. The art critic does not puzzle over the form of the object to be criticized: a painting is a painting, it is not a play or a dance or an opera. The educational critic does not have such an easy task.

> Which forms (of art) are appropriate to the metaphor of educational criticism . . ? Music and drama are scripted, yet artistic geniuses are free, within limits, to interpret a work. One hears slightly different cadenzas as different virtuosi plays Mozart's clarinet concerto. Richard Burton says his portrayal of Hamlet is different each night .. . . Is schooling scripted? . . . Is schooling multidimensional like opera and ballet, or is it a single dimension, like painting and symphonies? . . . . A novel and poem can be seen as documents, while a play, opera, and ballet are enactments. Is curriculum a document or is it an enactment? Is it both?[10]

Kagan believes that various metaphors are appropriate: "If we define teaching as a medium of communication and as an art form, we can regard a lesson simultaneously as a kinetic performance (evolving over time), a message, and a work of art."[11]

I did not begin my study with either a single artistic metaphor or a combination of metaphors for Writing to Read. It was only after observation, reading, and reflection that I recognized the rhythmic and orchestrated nature of the program. These images helped me sort out aesthetic criteria of balance and coherence and a related issue of playfulness which I address later.

Barrett notes that art criticism should lead to answers for such questions as "What is here? What is it about? How good is it? Is it art?"[11] We should expect then, that artistic criticism of educational practices should lead to answers for such questions as " What is here? What does it mean? How good is it? Is it educative? " I try to answer these questions for the Writing to Read program I observed in what follows.

"What is here?"

In order to answer this question, an expanded description of Writing to Read is necessary. Writing to Read is an IBM program for kindergarten and first grade students. It is multifaceted and uses computers, audiotapes, games, puzzles, writing journals, workbooks, and books. The program is based on the assumption

that writing and reading are reciprocal processes that can both be enhanced when they are taught simultaneously. Phonemic spelling is at the heart of the program. Forty-two phonemes or letter-sound combinations are taught which symbolize the sounds found in the English language. Students are taught phonemes with which to write (encode) as they learn to read (decode) the same symbols. The transition to regular spelling occurs after the students have progressed through the ten levels of the program.

Students begin the program as a class in kindergarten and continue in first grade working through 10 workbooks (work journals) which, along with the computer software, teach the phonemes. The program is designed to be self paced, i.e. students finish the program at different times.

Instruction occurs in a Writing to Read lab which is set up typically with five centers (work stations). IBM recommends that students rotate to a new center approximately every 15 minutes during the daily 60 minute period in the lab. Two centers use computers, one for the instructional software and the other for writing stories. One center has audiotapes and earphones for children to listen to stories. Another center uses tape recorders and earphones also but it is for instruction in the workbooks. In the third center children can choose from a variety of activities including working with a flannel board and looking at books or phonics games.

The program I observed varied slightly from the Writing to Read prototype both in the daily time periods and in the number

of centers in the lab. Students in this program visited the lab for approximately forty-five minutes each day rather than for a full hour. The lab contained six work stations instead of five. At the sixth station children worked under the direction of a teacher. They worked with Cuisennaire rods in kindergarten; in first grade they worked on spelling worksheets or other language arts assignments. The large number of children being served by the program necessitated these modifications.

The lab itself was appealing. Wall, ceiling, and floor were all involved in creating the setting. Computers lined two walls, one set equipped with instructional software, the other prepared for word processing. Near the door was the listening station, a table with audiotapes and headsets through which the children listened to such classics as Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel[13] and Blueberries for Sal. [14]

In the center of the room were tables for the work station, "Making Words." It was equipped with books, a flannel board, word puzzles, flash cards, paper and pencils, a bean bag chair and more. Adjacent to this center were tables for the work station not described in the Writing to Read materials at which students did work other than Writing to Read assignments. Opposite the door was a work station with tape recorders and headsets where instruction in the work journals occurred. Next to that was a lone table at which students could draw pictures to go with their finished stories.

On two walls and slightly above the students' heads were displayed the ubiquitous alphabet cards of primary grades with the eternally perfect upper and lower case letters. Above them were pictures of objects with the corresponding word. In the back of the room was a bulletin board with class rules, the correct date, and the name of the teacher for whichever class was in the lab.

Children's stories and pictures were hung up around the room in profusion. Hanging from the ceiling and over each center were cards identifying the name of the center.

What I observed varied little from day to day. Children came to the door of the Writing to Read lab promptly, folders in hand. In the folders were their work journals, extra worksheets, and perhaps a copy of a story they had written. They had been lined up in their rooms according to work groups so when the Writing to Read teacher motioned that they could enter the lab, they took up their places as surely as if they were taking their places in the brass or string section of an orchestra.

Three teachers staffed the lab: the paraprofessional who ran the lab, the classroom teacher, and the paraprofessional from the class working in the lab. The Writing to Read teacher would direct the children to settle in at their first station and then made sure that each child was working the correct program at the computer station. She was then free to answer their questions and give attention wherever it was needed around the room. The paraprofessional that accompanied the class generally sat at the

work journal tables and guided the children through the exercises in their work journals. The classroom teacher would set up the disks for each child at the word processing station and oversee all the work in that area of the room.

The sound of a "ping" from a kitchen timer signalled the end of a mini-period at the work stations. The children stopped what they were doing, and usually with a little reminding, pushed in their chairs and waited for the okay to move to the next station. After 12-14 minutes, the process would be repeated so that each child worked at three different stations every day. As the children moved from position to position, the teachers took the disks out of the word processor and filed them, rewound audiotapes, reset the software and generally monitored the children's movements. At the end of the allotted class time, children lined up at the door and filed out on the way back to their room.

"What does it mean?"

What is the meaning of these procedures? How can they be understood?. The exploration of two complementary themes, played again and again, may help to bring meaning. These themes are time and control.

Time . . . wait time . . . work time . . . idle time, start time, stop. Stop and wait, hurry and finish. Go . . . stop . . . wait . . . stop . . . wait . . . stop, stop, stop.

I observed children waiting to start, waiting to continue, and sometimes, waiting to stop. They waited when their classmates were not ready to begin or were too restless to continue, they waited when they were finished at a station before the time for that mini-period had elapsed. One of the most frequent teacher comments began, "I'm waiting . . ." She might have been waiting for Table 3 to settle down, for Mary to finish, or for Rashon to pick up his pencil, but when the teacher waited, the children were expected to wait too. The fragmentation of time into mini-periods and the number of children in the class led to excessive waiting.

Conversely, time fragmentation led to unnatural stopping. Children who were engrossed in work often had to stop without reaching closure. Even when they were deeply involved in a word game, a puzzle, or in writing a story, they were expected to stop at the sound of the bell. This caused the greatest problem at the writing station when difficulties in getting started sometimes resulted in only three or four minutes of actual work time.

Interruptions were common and came from many sources, the most frequent and most dissonant being the bell of the stove timer. Ironically, this led a teacher in one instance to fret, "What are we supposed to do when the bell rings? You're supposed to stand up and stand behind your chair. (In a shaming voice) I see children that are still working!"

These conditions led to an implicit value of speed and the expectation that children start fast, work fast, and stop abruptly.

The other major theme was control. Control of what? By whom? When? Why?

Control of children was primary. Traffic control was a major aspect of this and became an art in and of itself. Children were taught from the beginning how they were to move from station to station. No creative or independent meandering could be tolerated when time and numbers dictated that everyone had to be in the right place at the right time.

Not surprisingly, quietness was a big issue, yet by the nature of the program there was a lot of movement which led naturally to noise. Frequent changes in location led to frequent comments about noise. The quietest group was often singled out for praise. This occurred sometimes even when individual children in the group were not as quiet or compliant as other children in the room. The unintentional inconsistency in rewarding a group for such a desired behavior as quietness, though understandable, did not go unnoticed by the children.

Teachers frequently sought control through such statements as, "I like the way Melissa is sitting" or "I like the way Jaronda has started to work." In one forty minute period I heard a teacher begin a statement with "I like the way . . . " twenty-eight times.

Not only were the teachers controlling, authority was inherent in the materials and media also. By their design, the programmed instruction and workbooks limited choices. The children listened to stories on the tapes, not of their own choosing, but because they were available. Students were directed to write or do the assignments in their work journals because they were "supposed to." One of the teachers was particularly skittish with the computers and invested extra power in them by her obvious sense of frustration and personal powerlessness.

Children were rarely in control of anything, even at the writing station where they presumably had the greatest opportunity for control. I observed children being admonished for typing letters rather than words or for making patterns on the computer rather than writing sentences.

The numbers of children in the classes and the time constraint of the curriculum necessitated a measure of control to be sure. Control as I observed it, however, led to an implicit value in conformity and the belief that looking good may be more important than being good.

"How good is it?"

A sense of goodness or worth may be achieved through a consideration of aesthetic criteria. Although many criteria could be used, I will use only two: balance and coherence. I will also consider a related concept: playfulness.

Writing to Read is intended to be only part of a larger reading and writing curriculum. It is basically a skills program, a technnical program. Within that domain, the design of Writing to Read is carefully balanced. Theree is balance in the use of computers, for example: programmed instruction is balanced with word processing, decoding with encoding. There is balance in the activities--more creative (writing stories) are balanced with less creative (programmed instruction), passive listening activities are balanced with such active activities as writing or playing word games. Even the lab I observed was balanced; computers lined opposite walls and listening stations were placed across the room from each other.

Balance was frequently compromised in the enactment of the program. Control drowned out individuality and conformity diminished opportunities for exploration. The attempt to balance or equalize time worked against the uneven nature of creativity, so vital to the process of written expression.

Coherence relates to unity, cohesion, and consistency. A disturbing lack of consistency was observed in the expectation that children be creative in writing stories and in the reality that they were not given time to create. On one occasion when I heard a child groan, "But . . . I didn't get to finish my story," the teacher responded matter-of-factly, "You can finish tomorrow like Kirsten had to." Because of the rotation at the centers, "tomorrow" didn't even mean the next day, it meant two or three days hence.

There was little coherence between work in the classroom and what was expected in the Writing to Read lab. In the classroom, for example, children used basal readers that were unrelated to the Writing to Read materials. Ideas for the stories children wrote at the computers did not seem to have their origin in classroom discussion or activity. Only behavioral expectations seemed to be consistent from setting to setting.

With only brief periods for work, children were taught to stop rather than finish. More unsettling than this, however, is my fear that they were less disturbed by this incoherence than I was. I believe that even at age six or seven they had come to see this as part of the meaning of school.

Playfulness is not in itself an aesthetic criterion, but it is an important aspect of artistic expression. Young children, computers, a new room, colorful pictures, wonderful books . . . an atmosphere for playfulness seemed inherent in the conditions.

Playfulness, however, was not encouraged. Explorations with words and shapes and sounds seemed to be considered poor use of the time and equipment. Conversation between the teachers and students was rarely playful; it was usually terse and to the point, presumably because of limited time. On more than a few occasions, I heard a teacher explain to a child at the writing station that he needed to stop playing because he was "supposed to be" writing. In spite of these criticisms, however, I

observed children time and time again who delighted at learning to read, learning to write, and learning to work a computer.

Writing to Read is a skills program, a technical piece designed to teach the decoding and encoding of language. Within the confines of the design, the intended program offers symmetry, variety, and continuity. Considered as a script or a score, it has balance and coherence. Problems appear in the enactment, however. Viewed as a performance, poor staging threatens a long run.

"Is it educative?"

The form of education is of great significance because form carries meaning. For schooling to be educative, that is, for schooling to lead to mental and moral growth, its form must stimulate meaning that is expansive, expressive, and individualistic.

Writing to Read is primarily a technical segment of the curriculum, one small patch in a huge educational quilt spread over the early years of life. It is technical in both content and method.

The content is based on phonemes and sound-symbol relationships, the regularities of the language. It stresses the reciprocity of writing and reading. It teaches rudimentary computer skills: children learn, for example, that they can sit before a computer and change the image on a screen by the mere push of a button. The method is technical primarily because the

individuality of each student is not central. Students move from one predetermined station to another in foreordained time units. What of the student who can read at the beginning of the program? Does she have to go through all the work stations? What of the child who learns to read quickly? Would he need to spend time at the work journal station? More crucially, what about the child who is captivated by the cleverness of his own story; should he have to leave it unfinished at the sound of the bell?

Can a program that is technical in content be other than technical in method? Can a technical program be educative?

The assumptions of a technical program, namely, that what students learn can be known, should be known, and should be prescribed, severely restrict meaning and hamper expansiveness and individuality. A technical program in and of itself, is not likely to be educative. The Writing to Read program I observed was not educative.

What would it take for the program I observed to be more educative? Balance in enactment--more time for experimentation, less for programmed packages, more for uniqueness, less for conformity. Coherence--consistency between the program and classroom life. Placement of the program in the classroom might enhance coherence. Important also would be a consciousness of those involved that the skills of Writing to Read are not ends in themselves but means to more expansive and artistic outcomes. None of these changes would likely leave an impact, however,

unless the larger school environment--curriculum in its fullest sense--nurtured individuality, expressiveness, and creativity.

It should be noted that while artistic criticism led me to judgments about educativeness, it did not take me into other significant areas. I did not, for example, address political issues concerning the motives behind the adoption of Writing to Read as Slavin does[15] nor did I express concern about the program contributing to the deskilling of teaching as Apple might.[16] A more complete evaluation of Writing to Read would require that political questions such as these can be raised along with, in Huebner's terms,[17] technical, scientific, ethical, and aesthetic questions. No single set of questions by itself is sufficient for thorough program evaluation.

Artistic Criticism: A Reprise

The use of artistic criticism in educational settings is a natural extension of the concept of education as a work of art or of teaching as an artful performance. It casts educational activity in new patterns and allows for consideration of rhythm, harmony, integrity, balance, wholeness, and so on. It introduces new language and therefore new concepts into educational discourse.

Artistic criticism provides a unique perspective; it does not provide an all-encompassing view. It offers but one lens

with which to view educational activity. But that lens is powerful; it can be meaning-full.

> What we can productively ask of a set of ideas is not whether it is really true but whether it is useful, whether it allows one to do one's work more effectively, whether it enables one to perceive the phenomenon in more complex and subtle ways, whether it expands one's intelligence in dealing with important problems.[18]
>
> Elliot Eisner

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